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Environment and sustainable development: International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Council, by resolution 1999/63 of 30 July 1999 entitled "International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements", requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session on the implementation of that resolution.

2. The present report complements the reports of the Secretary-General on the activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, 1990-2000 (A/54/132-1998/80 and Add.1) and on recommendations on institutional arrangements for disaster reduction activities of the United Nations system after the conclusion of the International Decade (A/54/136). It focuses on the specific arrangements that the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to put in place. In particular, it presents the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction which will serve as a framework for the future activities of the United Nations system in this area. It also describes the organizational measures to be taken to implement Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/63, including the establishment of an inter-agency task force and a secretariat which would be in place by 1 January 2000.

3. In submitting the present report, the Secretary-General wishes to emphasize the increasing vulnerability of societies to natural hazards, and the importance of adopting preventive strategies and practical measures to reduce the potential loss of human lives resulting from natural disasters. In the introduction to his annual report on the work of the Organization, the Secretary-General stated that it is essential that the pioneering work carried out during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction be continued and that the strategy for the new millennium, "A safer world in the twenty-first century: risk and disaster reduction", had his full support.[1] It is with these considerations in mind that the Secretary-General submits to the General Assembly the present report, concerning successor arrangements to the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

II. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

4. Disaster reduction is essentially a medium-term to long-term activity. Through the best use of scientific, technical and socio-economic knowledge, it aims to ensure that Governments and civil societies take preventive measures and put in place practices that will safeguard societies against the negative impact of future natural and

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technological disasters. Its success rests on building a culture of prevention, a difficult undertaking since the benefits lie in the distant future and are not immediately tangible.

5. There is an overriding need for a common approach to disaster reduction activities throughout the world through the adoption of a global strategy to guide efforts and initiatives at all levels. The experience gained during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction has shown that successful long-term prevention strategies depend first and foremost on broad-based, cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation.

6. The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, which will succeed the programme for the Decade, is contained in the document entitled "A safer world for the twenty-first century: risk and disaster reduction". The document was adopted at a progr[illegible]me forum for the Decade held in July 1999 by partners in the International Framework of Action for the Decade, which included representatives of Governments, the scientific and technical community, academia and the United Nations system. The Economic and Social Council took note of the strategy in its resolution 1999/63.

7. The main objectives of the Strategy are: (a) to enable communities to become resilient to the effects of natural, technological and environmental hazards, thus reducing the compound risk posed to social and economic vulnerabilities within modern societies; and (b) to proceed from protection against hazards to the management of risk, by integrating risk prevention strategies into sustainable development activities.

8. The Strategy is structured around four main goals derived from the above objectives:

(a) To increase public awareness of the risks that natural, technological and environmental hazards pose to modern societies;

(b) To obtain commitments by public authorities to reduce risks to people, their livelihoods, social and economic infrastructure and environmental resources;

(c) To engage public participation at all levels of implementation so as to create disaster-resistant communities through increased partnerships and expanded risk reduction networks at all levels;

(d) To reduce economic and social losses caused by disasters as measured, for example, by gross domestic product.

9. The above objectives are of a broad nature and can serve as a framework for disaster reduction efforts at all levels, from local communities to national, regional and international concerns and interests. Member States and organizations of the United Nations system have begun to set in place strategies, policies and practical measures in the field of disaster reduction. For example, the World Meteorological Organization and the World Bank recently entered into a memorandum of understanding on improved cooperation in the field of disaster reduction. Similarly, the Government of Switzerland, through its Federal Board of Technology Institutes, has established the World Institute for Disaster Management, which facilitates worldwide scientific research and technology in the field of disaster reduction. The United Nations Development Programme has started an operational programme of disaster reduction activities, and the United Nations Environment Programme has strengthened its activities for disaster reduction in the environmental field. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has reaffirmed its commitment to disaster reduction, *inter alia*, in the context of the World Conference on Science, held at Budapest from 26 June to 1 July 1999. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has indicated its continued commitment to disaster reduction in the areas of early warning, prevention, preparedness, risk and impact assessment, response and rehabilitation, and is currently taking steps to strengthen further its capacity in those areas. For its part, the International Council of Scientific Unions has established a subcommittee on disaster reduction and has endorsed a global project for disaster reduction in megacities.

10. In the light of these many initiatives, it is essential that the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction serve as both an overall strategy and as a cooperative effort to promote cost-effective approaches to disaster prevention. The Secretary-General believes that the institutional arrangements established in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/63 should support that purpose. Consequently, the task force and secretariat will function under the direct authority of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs from 1 January 2000, with the objective of facilitating the implementation of the goals of the International Strategy.

III. Institutional arrangements for the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/63

11. In its resolution 1999/63, the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to:

(a) Establish, as at January 2000, an inter-agency task force, with representation from all relevant United Nations bodies and members of the scientific and technical community, including regional representation, to serve as the main forum within the United Nations for continued and concerted emphasis on natural disaster reduction, in particular for defining strategies for international cooperation at all levels in this field, while ensuring complementarity of action with other agencies;

(b) Maintain the existing inter-agency secretariat function for natural disaster reduction as a distinct focal point for the coordination of the work of the task force, to place the inter-agency task force and inter-agency secretariat under the direct authority of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and to finance it from extrabudgetary resources through a specific trust fund.

12. In the same resolution, the Economic and Social Council decided that the international cooperative framework for natural disaster reduction, as recommended in the report of the Secretary-General, should draw on the success of the functional and organizational arrangements that were put in place for the Decade.

13. In anticipation of a decision by the General Assembly on successor arrangements for the Decade, the Secretary-General has included activities related to natural disaster reduction under section 25, Humanitarian assistance, of his proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001. For subprogramme 3, Natural disaster reduction, it was noted that pending a decision by the General Assembly on the content and structure of a successor arrangement, it was expected that the secretariat of the Decade would serve as the liaison and coordinating entity for organizations of the United Nations system, as well as for the private sector, with regard to implementation of the disaster reduction strategy for the twenty-first century.

14. Taking into account the considerations in paragraphs 12 and 13 above, and also the ongoing dialogue within the international disaster reduction community in the fields of climate change, scientific research, environment, sustainable development and disaster reduction, the Secretary-General is of the view that the successor arrangements for the Decade should be flexible in the initial period and adapted as experience is gained. The arrangements would, therefore, need to be reviewed after one year, in consultation with key stakeholders, and the necessary adjustments made.

A. Inter-agency task force

15. By resolution 1999/63, the Economic and Social Council requested that a task force be established as part of the successor arrangements for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. This body would serve as the main forum within the United Nations for continued and concerted emphasis on natural disaster reduction. As recommended in paragraph 20 of his report on institutional arrangements for disaster reduction activities after the conclusion of the Decade (A/54/136), the major functions of the task force would be: (a) to serve as the main forum within the United Nations system for devising strategies and policies for the reduction of natural hazards; (b) to identify gaps in disaster reduction policies and programmes and recommend remedial action; (c) to ensure complementarity of action by agencies involved in disaster reduction; (d) to provide policy guidance to the secretariat; and (e) to convene ad hoc meetings of experts on issues related to disaster reduction.

16. In its work, the task force would follow the guiding principles of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, outlined above. This requires a sound capacity for tracking future disaster trends, as well as maintaining the progress achieved during the Decade, in concert with those partners both inside and outside the United Nations system that contributed to the success of the Decade.

17. In its resolution 1999/63, the Economic and Social Council decided that the international cooperative framework for natural disaster reduction should draw on the success of the functional and organizational arrangements that were put in place for the Decade. Pursuant to that decision, the task force would be composed in such a manner that due consideration would be given to the achievements of and the lessons learned from the following major components of the International Framework of Action (see General Assembly resolution 44/236 of 22 December 1989), even if these bodies cease to exist upon the conclusion of the Decade:

(a) The Scientific and Technical Committee, which ensured, *inter alia*, adequate consideration of overall scientific and technical concerns during the Decade, effective integration of existing knowledge and technology

in the development of international cooperative activities, and the promotion of future research needs;

(b) The Inter-Agency Steering Committee for the Decade, which provided the platform for dialogue among all relevant organizations of the United Nations system, as well as institutional interests outside the United Nations system, including regional and intergovernmental bodies concerned with disaster reduction;

(c) The informal contact group of permanent missions at Geneva, which ensured an action-oriented dialogue among Governments and the United Nations system on all major issues of disaster reduction after the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in 1994.

18. The task force will seek close cooperation with the national platforms for the Decade, many of which included representation from the community of non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society in general. These platforms should continue, as appropriate, to translate internationally concerted strategies for disaster reduction into coordinated action at the national level, in particular in the areas of advocacy and promotion. Many of these national committees and focal point administrations are already in the process of ensuring their functional continuity in support of the successor arrangements for the Decade, as approved by the Economic and Social Council.

19. In addition, synergies which were developed during the Decade between the cross-sectoral issue of disaster reduction and other major strategies of the United Nations system in the social, economic and environmental fields must be retained and fostered. This relates to the coordinated approach adopted for the follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summit meetings in the social, economic and environmental fields, as well as to their respective plans of action. It relates also to the existing and envisaged coordinating frameworks and mechanisms in the fields of humanitarian assistance, sustainable development, technical cooperation, and environment and climate change. Consequently, there is a need to take into account and develop further the existing interface with inter-agency bodies, such as the Inter-Agency Committee for Sustainable Development, the Inter-Agency Committee on the Climate Agenda, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the relevant subcommittees of the Administrative Committee on Coordination. Emerging platforms, such as the environmental management group proposed in the report of the Secretary-General on environment and human settlements (A/54/463), which was supported by the General Assembly in its resolution 53/242 of 28 July 1999, will need to coordinate their work effectively with that of the task force on disaster reduction. Inter-agency efforts towards improved early-warning capacities for disasters will continue to be an essential component of disaster reduction, and will thus be a key component of the work of the task force.

20. The provisions of the Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/46 of 28 July 1999, on international cooperation to reduce the impact of the El Niño phenomenon, will have to be taken fully into account in the establishment of the task force for disaster reduction. In paragraph 7 of that resolution, the Council called for the continued and full implementation of the concerted efforts of the United Nations system towards reducing the impact of the El Niño phenomenon as an integral function of the successor arrangements to be made following the conclusion of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

21. The above-mentioned considerations clearly illustrate the challenges of establishing a task force that is broad enough in its membership to encompass all elements of disaster reduction, but at the same time compact enough to work effectively and efficiently.

22. Taking the above-mentioned considerations into account, the Secretary-General will establish, under the authority of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, the Task Force for Disaster Reduction with a limited number of core members, including the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs as Chair and the Director of the secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction as Secretary. The membership of the Task Force would rotate every two years, in a manner that would ensure both continuity of work and the uninterrupted participation of relevant key strategic sectors of the United Nations system. It would be composed of: (a) eight representatives of organizations and entities of the United Nations system, to be designated by the Administrative Committee on Coordination; (b) eight representatives of civil society and non-governmental organizations, to be designated initially by the Scientific and Technical Committee of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction before it comes to a conclusion at the end of 1999; and (c) six representatives from regional entities to be designated by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, in consultation with regional groupings and Governments.

23. Interested organizations not designated among the members listed above would be able to participate in the work of the Task Force. Representatives of the inter-agency bodies described in paragraph 19 above would be welcome to participate, as would representatives of Governments which expressed their interest to the Under-Secretary-

General for Humanitarian Affairs. Disaster reduction experts would also be welcome to participate on an invitational basis.

24. The Task Force for Disaster Reduction would organize its work as it deems necessary, but it is expected that, in the initial phase, it would meet twice a year. It is also suggested that the Task Force should constitute sub-groups at the expert level to work on specific thematic issues, as and when required. Whenever possible, extensive use would be made of telecommunication technology in order to reduce the number of meetings.

B. Inter-agency secretariat

25. As elaborated by the Secretary-General in paragraph 21 of his report (A/54/136), the key functions of the inter-agency secretariat would be: (a) to serve as the focal point within the United Nations system for the coordination of strategies and programmes for natural disaster reduction, and to ensure synergy between disaster reduction strategies and those in the socio-economic and humanitarian fields; (b) to support the inter-agency task force in the development of policies on natural disaster reduction; (c) to promote a worldwide culture of reduction of the negative effects of natural hazards, through advocacy campaigns; (d) to serve as an international clearing house for the dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge on disaster reduction strategies; and (e) to backstop the policy and advocacy activities of national committees for natural disaster reduction. In terms of its approach and work, the secretariat would retain its multisectoral character and regional representation.

26. By resolution 1999/63, the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to take into consideration the functional and organizational arrangements established for the Decade in maintaining the secretariat for natural disaster reduction in the proposed budget programme for the biennium 2000-2001. The Secretary-General therefore intends to follow the practice of the Decade, maintaining a small secretariat with its members drawn, as appropriate, from the international community of disaster reduction experts and other relative experts, *inter alia*, seconded from competent United Nations organizations, Governments and non-governmental organizations. Secondment of personnel from relevant entities outside the United Nations system would also be welcomed. In this context, the secretariat would welcome the secondment of staff from both within and outside the United Nations system on a non-reimbursable basis. The inter-agency nature of the work of the secretariat is understood to be on the same basis as it was within the context of the Decade, namely, of a substantive, multidisciplinary and intersectoral character, rather than purely institutional.

27. The successful performance of the Regional Unit for Latin America and the Caribbean, established in connection with the Decade and located in Costa Rica, shows how cost-effective arrangements for regional representation could be put in place. The Secretary-General would therefore wish to maintain such regional arrangements for the new secretariat.

28. In the light of the above considerations, the secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, as a successor to the secretariat for the Decade, will have a small staff of seven substantive officers and be managed by a director under the direct authority of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. Support staff for secretarial work, as well as for administrative and financial issues, will also be provided. The secretariat will be structured along substantive lines so that it can provide corresponding support to the four main areas of work as defined by the strategy document entitled "A safer world in the twenty-first century: risk and disaster reduction". Funding for the secretariat will come exclusively from extrabudgetary resources. Staff additional to the core staff mentioned above would be considered on the basis of special funding for specific activities to be carried out by the secretariat in connection with its key functions, as described in paragraph 25 above. As indicated in paragraph 14 above, the secretariat for the International Strategy would function as a flexible and evolving structure with adjustments to be made for the next biennium, and would be reviewed in a process that would start after the first year of operation. More detailed information on the proposed secretariat is contained in the annex to the present report.

29. Pursuant to the decision of the Economic and Social Council that the secretariat be funded from voluntary contributions, the Secretary-General will rename the current Trust Fund for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction as the Trust Fund for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and modify the related terms of reference accordingly.

C. Other institutional arrangements

30. The Secretary-General wishes to draw the attention of Member States to the fact that, in its resolution 44/236 by which proclaimed the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, the General Assembly decided to

designate the second Wednesday of October International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, to be observed annually during the Decade by the international community. The observance of the Day has significantly contributed to raising awareness of disaster reduction in local communities and countries around the world. More than 90 countries have actively participated in such observances on a regular basis in the past decade. Given that the first objective of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction is the promotion of public awareness of the issue, and in view of the catalytic nature of such a Day which is celebrated around a common theme throughout the world, the Secretary-General recommends that the annual observance of the International Day for Disaster Reduction on the second Wednesday of October be maintained.

31. Another essential element of the success of the message of the Decade has been the active involvement and support of United Nations resident coordinators in broad-based, multisectoral approaches to disaster reduction at the country level. The Secretary-General therefore recommends that this involvement continue and that the resident coordinators participate actively in the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, in close liaison with national platforms, as appropriate. The Secretary-General will also request resident coordinators to assist in the establishment of such platforms where they do not exist.

32. The Economic and Social Council, in resolution 1999/63, called on all Governments to maintain and strengthen established national and multisectoral platforms for natural disaster reduction in order to achieve sustainable development goals and objectives, with the full utilization of scientific and technical means. It is indeed incumbent on each Government to decide on the form and structure of the multisectoral platform in its own country. Given the success of national committees and focal points for the Decade in a large number of countries, the Secretary-General strongly encourages all Governments to take the necessary measures to implement this appeal.

IV. Conclusion: call for support by Member States for disaster reduction activities

33. The numerous devastating earthquakes and floods which took place in many parts of the world in 1999 are reminders of one of the most pressing challenges of our times: the extraordinary increase in the number and extent of disasters. Communities will always have to face natural hazards but recent disasters owe as much to human activity as to the forces of nature. It is therefore incumbent upon the community of nations to ensure that the necessary measures be taken to reduce the loss of life, human suffering and the dilapidation of economic assets when disasters strike. Today, there is an increased need for a shift in emphasis from post-disaster rehabilitation to pre-disaster prevention.

34. The approach outlined in the present report, as well as the institutional arrangements to be introduced or maintained in pursuance of Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/63, will go a long way towards building a culture of prevention with regard to natural and technological disasters. Programmes of disaster reduction as well as the institutional arrangements to implement them will, however, not yield the desired results unless there is political will and the necessary resources to support the required measures and policies.

35. The Secretary-General therefore appeals to all Governments, in particular Governments in a position to do so, to increase the level of their support to national, regional and international programmes for disaster reduction, and to establish a better balance between their expenditures on relief activities and those on prevention activities. It is symptomatic that the financial support expected from Member States for the institutional arrangements to be set up for the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/63 is equivalent to only about 10 per cent of the resources that are expected to be received for disaster response activities. "Prevention pays", according to the slogan used in this year's International Day for Disaster Reduction. This message should be heeded by Governments by increasing the amount of resources provided to prevention activities, including those for the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 1* (A/54/1), para. 35.

Annex

Proposed secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

A. Core posts

Office of the Director		
1	Director	D-2
2	Special Assistant to the Director for Programme Coordination and Special Initiatives	L-3
3	Secretary	General Service (Other level)
Other posts		
4	Senior Adviser for Policy Issues	L-5
5	Senior Officer for Inter-agency Liaison	L-5
6	Awareness and Promotion Issues Officer	L-3
7	Public Commitment and Policies Issues Officer	L-3
8	Technical and Scientific Issues Officer	L-3
9	Economic and Social Issues Officer	L-3
10	Registry, Mailing and Publications Clerk	General Service (Other level)
11	Secretary	General Service (Other level)
12	Secretary	General Service (Other level)
Administrative posts (to be financed from the Programme Support Costs Account)		
13	Accounts, Certifying and Fundraising Officer	L-3
14	Administrative and Financial Clerk	General Service (Other level)

B. Non-core posts

The intention is to use additional non-core posts, depending on specific initiatives. At the present stage, funding is sought for:

(a) Specific advocacy and promotional activities, including those at the regional level in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean;

(b) Specific substantive initiatives, such as early warning, protection of cities against floods and strengthening of the trade capacity of disaster-prone developing countries.